

Opening Statement of Congressman Derek Kilmer
Hearing: “Making the House More Accessible to the Disability
Community”
May 27, 2021

Chair Kilmer: [*Bang gavel*]

The Committee will come to order.

Without objection, the Chair is authorized to declare a recess of the Committee at any time. I now recognize myself for 5 minutes to give an opening statement.

Over the past few weeks, this Committee has held a series of hearings generally focused on steps Congress can take to build a strong and inclusive workforce. The witnesses we’ve heard from have shared some great ideas for recruiting talented interns and staff. They’ve also helped us understand what Congress can do better when it comes to retaining and promoting staff who reflect a diversity of histories, experiences, and views.

Putting these ideas into practice is wholly consistent with the doctrines on which the “People’s House” is based. The Framers envisioned a body of representatives that would reflect the diverse views of the American people. And diverse staff help members process and understand these views in ways they might otherwise miss.

A governing system designed to give voice to the people depends on the active participation of people. If members are to transform public opinion into public policy, they need to hear from the people they represent. Engaged constituents routinely meet with their representatives and staff. They send emails, make phone calls, and attend townhalls. They also follow committee and floor activity, either in-person or

online. Their ability to access their government in multiple ways gives them voice.

But constituent access to Congress is not universal. The physical barriers to access are many and vary across the Capitol complex. Small elevators, steep steps, heavy doors, and tight spaces are hallmarks of this institution. Digital accessibility is also a challenge. Individuals who are visually or hearing impaired currently cannot access congressional websites and livestreamed proceedings in any consistent way.

This reality conflicts with the Framers' vision of the "People's House." The right of equal access to Congress applies to every American.

Last year, members of this Committee sponsored and passed a resolution that included language to address the equal access challenges persons with disabilities face when working for, visiting, or interacting with Congress. Since then, the House has made progress toward making the proceedings and functions of Congress accessible to all Americans. This Committee will continue to partner with the offices responsible for implementing these recommendations to make sure the good work continues.

Part of that work is to publicly highlight why these issues are so important and that's what the Committee intends to do today. The issue of access is central to the daily work of Congress. Staff play a key role in this work and if they're unable to do their jobs efficiently and effectively due to insufficient accommodations, they'll leave the Hill for organizations that are better prepared to set them up for success. Congress can – and should – do more to prevent such losses.

Unequal access presents recruitment challenges, as well. Internships are the main pipeline to careers on the Hill but they remain out of reach for many individuals with disabilities. Requiring accommodations should not be disqualifying but in reality, it often is. I want to make a quick public service announcement here: The Office of Congressional

Accessibility Services can help offices with the technical and in-person support interns with disabilities need so that they're able to do their jobs and get the same experience as every other intern on the Hill.

The daily work and proceedings of Congress also rely upon public input. That's why it's so important for the legislative branch to be equally accessible to all Americans. Physical and digital barriers should not prevent people with disabilities from having a voice in the legislative process.

The bottom line is that a modern Congress is one that welcomes and accommodates every American.

Making Congress more accessible to persons with disabilities is a process. And today we are joined by a panel of experts who are going to help us understand why investing in this process is so important. I'm looking forward to hearing their recommendations for what Congress can do better. I'd like to now invite Vice Chair Timmons to share some opening remarks.